

## **Language Policy as a Topic of Election Campaigns**

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In the course of almost all election campaigns, politicians traditionally raised the language issue anyway linked to challenges of ethnic policy. Though, the latter is not in the focus of attention of political parties and other subjects of legislative initiative. The situation concerning drafting of bills on ethno-political and language issues actually remains as it was. This is evidenced by the absence of changes and amendments in the law "On National Minorities" passed in 1992 before the adoption of the Constitution of Ukraine in 1996. The Concept of National Ethnic Policy being developed to no purpose since 1995 remains on paper as well. The ill-fated law "On Renewal of Rights of Persons Deported on Ethnic Grounds" is still vetoed, which complicated for long the development and implementation of government policy for integration of previously deported peoples into Ukraine's society.

Among other things, political parties are not eager to invite representatives of ethnic communities for membership. This process is not enshrined in the legislation. Hence, they get on electoral lists rather as businessmen, already famous politicians and party activists. For instance, this concerns leader of the Armenian community and famous businessman N. Mkhitarian (No. 95 on the Party of regions' list) and leader of the Romanian community I. Popescu (No. 173 on the Party of regions' list). The same is true about businessman and President of the Association of Ethno-Cultural Organizations of Ukraine MP B. Feldman (BYuT). Hence, in this case, those, who form blocs, are hardly guided by the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the Council of Europe.

Contemporary ethno-cultural policy mostly adds up to language issues. They are focused on the revision of the status of the Russian language in Ukraine. By the way, the period of 2005–2006, before the election of the Verkhovna Rada of the 5<sup>th</sup> convocation, was remarkable for much greater efforts of MPs in the area of drafting and submission of language bills. First in April and then in May and June 2005, the Verkhovna Rada was to consider 13 (!) language bills, most of which were geared toward a possible change in the status of Russian. According to conclusions by parliamentary committees, the majority of the above documents ran counter to the Constitution of Ukraine as to granting Russian a special status, i.e. the status of official (second national) language in Ukraine. However, by late 2005, the Verkhovna Rada did not pass any resolution on this issue. The same happened in 2006. Specifically, a number of bills concerning the peculiar development of the law "On the Ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 1992" were drafted. The law on the ratification of the Charter and its official translation caused various political speculations destabilizing the social climate. Legislative initiatives by MPs – representatives of parties and blocs – on ethno-political problems mostly concerned language policy and possibilities of the revised use of Russian as the "regional language".

It is safe to assume that political forces use language, ethno-political and regional issues as a tool for their election campaigns and strengthening of the existing social "natives and strangers" stereotype, which could offer parties and blocs an opportunity

to enhance their attractiveness in the eyes of voters. The aspiration to realize scenarios built on the division into "natives" and "strangers" in the area of language and ethnic policies and the search of other than "regional" identity is explained by regional differences in ethno-linguistic characteristics, perception and interpretation of historical events, the absence of the shared "national" vision of Ukraine's future and an attitude to Euro-Atlantic and European integration.

Furthermore, language preferences of Ukrainians also matter a lot, since they allow political parties to use and exploit language problems every now and then. According to data of the 2001 National Census, 5,544,729 ethnic Ukrainians believed Russian their mother tongue. At the same time, the number of representatives of other ethnicities, who consider the Russian language as their native, is increasing as well. For instance, 89% or 80,992 out of 91,548 Greeks deem Russian their native language. Taking into account that linguistic self-identification is one of determinants of ethnic identification, the issue of self-identification is now extremely important for both ethnic Ukrainians and national minorities. For the time being, political forces cannot suggest effective solutions to such problems evoked by the inherited from the former USSR stereotypes of "internationalism" and de-nationalized image of a "Soviet person".

### **The 2007 Election Campaign Was Not an Exception from the Tradition to Use the Language Issue**

Earlier on, the issue of the status of Russian was mostly a prerogative of the Communist Party, Progressive Socialist Party and Socialist Democratic Party (united), whereas nowadays, this issue has been a concern for the Party of Regions since the 2004 presidential campaign. As long ago as on September 27, 2004, V. Yanukovych voiced for the official status of Russian, simultaneously exploiting the idea of double citizenship. The Party of Regions returned to the issues of language relations and the status of Russian at the 2006 parliamentary elections, when V. Yanukovych promised that his Party will raise the issue of the official status of Russian right after the elections. He said, "...This issue is a matter of principle for us, for it is the official status of the Russian language that will eliminate many contradictions in our society." In another interview, Mr. Yanukovych said about an opportunity for holding a referendum on the status of Russian as the second national language attended with amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine, "...we shall hold the referendum, if necessary and we shall change the Constitution, if necessary. The parliament will make a respective decision. I am convinced we will have enough votes for it. And we will win the referendum on this problem."

Later on, leaders of the Party of Regions used the language issue in preparations for the referendum.

Incidentally, the Socialist Democratic Party (united) used the similar issue at the previous referendum. In early September, the Party of Regions has started implementing the initiative concerning the referendum on the status of the Russian language. Member of the Party of Regions Borys Kolesnykov stated that this time, the President will sign a submission for holding the referendum. "At least, 45% of Ukrainians deem that two languages must be used. Experience of other countries proved its advantages and consideration of interests of all citizens," he said.

It is safe to state that after the elections, the "language referendum" will be another argument of the Party of Regions for forming a broad coalition and accusing the President of Ukraine of a failure to bring forward the language issue for the referendum. It has to be stated that in 2006, when some local councils declared Russian as the "regional" language, this issue also served as a factor of pressure on governmental agencies by local authorities.

BYuT traditionally accused the Party of Regions of the use of the language issue as populism. Specifically, at the 2006 parliamentary elections, Y. Tymoshenko criticized V. Yanukovych for the use of the above problem only as an opportunity to attract voters as saying, "Residents of Luhansk, explain me, why over two years of premiership, Mr. Yanukovych has failed to submit a bill on the Russian language for consideration of the Verkhovna Rada? Because it is a one-off issue designed for the election campaign," she pointed out. Speaking at the BYuT's inter-party congress on August 5, Y. Tymoshenko stated that she believes it is presently inexpedient to discuss the status of Russian as the second national language and stressed that political forces and state officials must stop speculating on this matter. "Stop speaking about the second national language," she said. "If some people want Russian to be the second national language, then they have to learn Ukrainian first and only after that raise this issue," emphasized Y. Tymoshenko.

Members of Our-Ukraine-People's Self-Defense Bloc are not unanimous about the language issue, at least, concerning the problem articulation and its priority in political programs. For instance, at the beginning of the campaign, Y. Lutsenko, the first on the Bloc's electoral list, said at a meeting of People's Self-Defense in Ternopil that Ukrainians shall not be divided into party and non-party members, confessions and languages but unite. "It is important that people pray in different temples but for the united Ukraine," he stated. In Dnipropetrovsk in June 2007, Y. Lutsenko stressed he will insist that the election program of a mega-bloc of democratic forces (in case of its formation) shall not be focused on "humanitarian issues" – NATO, the Russian language status and URA soldiers. Such the position caused heated debates and critical remarks of representatives of a would-be bloc. Specifically, member of the People's Rukh Y. Kendsior was negative about these statements and said, "For him, problems of language, NATO and accession to the European Community are allegedly minor. Though, it is senseless to be afraid of raising the issues of statehood, the use and promotion of the Ukrainian language in the Ukrainian state." "If Halychyna residents have already heard his statement about the unwillingness to raise the language issue, what does he want to win there? Doesn't he understand that people will not give their votes for his Bloc," the politician continued.

By the way, notwithstanding the "social element" of program promises of political parties at the 2006 elections, value language issues does not seem minor for voters, especially when politicians repeat it again and again. This is evidenced by not only sociological data but also voters' attention to such political antagonists at the 2007 parliamentary elections as O.Tyahnibok's Union "Svoboda" ("Freedom") and N. Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party. O.Tyahnibok suggests policy of offensive ukrainization and conducts a large-scale campaign in western Ukraine. Incidentally, this might strip BYuT and Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defense Bloc of electoral support in this region.

Regarding the course of the election campaign and "referendum accomplishments", the language issue will remain a component of political slogans. Yet, this evidences that a failure to find either a solution to this problem or a political method for the development and promotion of Ukrainian or a compromise with those striving to change the status of Russian. Otherwise, politicians will lose a subject of a specific discussion that splits the society and earns them political dividends at elections.

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